

The Ohio State University

The Consideration of Form in Relation to
Function in Ceremonial Tea Ware

Annie Hung
BFA Ceramics
Steven Thurston
December 01, 2017

The Consideration of Form in Relation to Function in Ceremonial Tea Ware

“In the tea world there is a saying that the pot is the father of tea, water is the mother of tea, and charcoal is the friend of tea” (Chuen, 2002, p.74)

The Chinese tea ceremony has existed as a vehicle for social interaction for hundreds of years, becoming a documented art form during the Tang dynasty in the form of the *Classic of Tea* (茶經). Since tea acts as a main component in social situations; there is a focus upon the quality and taste of the tea rather than on the symbolisms that exist in a formal ceremony, such as in the Japanese tea ceremony. In this manner, the details that are considered when setting the scene of the tea ceremony are components that are believed to enhance the flavor of the tea leaves. For instance, as a product of the earth, there are many nature-oriented details involved in the preparation of the tea leaves and the environment of the service, such as the five elements of nature- water, fire, wood, earth, and air. The tea preparation process of heating and cleaning the wares prior to serving the tea is also meant to create a clean flavor profile for the tea that is being served.

During the Sung dynasty, it was “discovered that the pottery greatly influenced the taste of the tea and potters began to develop and refine their craftsmanship” (Chuen, 2002, p. 20). Since then, there has been a focus on researching the design and functionality of the teapot. The type of clay is important as it can impart its own flavors into the tea soup, and the porosity can affect the way the pot ages. Glaze is chosen for the visual benefits it can bring to the tea and it is often determined by the type of tea being served. In that sense, the quality of the tea and its preparation can be highlighted to whomever the tea is served to. For example, if the tea is a whipped tea, the interior of the tea cup is glazed black in order to highlight the foam that is created from the whipping. The foam that is created is the main sign that the tea

is brewed well, thus the vessel will show off this aspect. The design of the tea ware is also used to emphasize the experience of the senses. A cup with a lid is used to serve fragrant teas so when it is brewed, the lid serves to trap all the aromas up to the point of the tea being enjoyed. At this point the person drinking the tea will open up the lid and become overwhelmed with the smell of the tea before enjoying the taste.

Growing up as a first generation Taiwanese American, my existence within a gray area marked by both Western and Eastern culture ideals prevents me from fully fitting into either. Parts of me feel more comfortable with Western ideals while other parts speak to the Asian traditions. My research into the art of tea ware serves as a vehicle to help me learn more about my Eastern roots, while my Western upbringing allows me to explore different designs that stray away from tradition. The tea ceremony provides a way to get a better understanding of my Asian heritage since it is an art form that stands with hundreds of years of history and traditions, many of which continue to be an important part of the making process today. The importance of the role tea ware plays in the flavor and experience of the tea soup itself presents a source of experimentation for craftspeople working with the ceramic material. With the change of each dynasty comes another large evolution of what type of tea and tea ware is popular in society. By looking into the various iterations of a defined set of functional ware, one can discover trends that depict what aspects are the most important when considering a “good” versus “bad” pot.

Technique

There are two main types of tea: ones with a light, delicate flavor and ones with a strong, earthier flavor. I began by looking into what aspects of the tea is considered the most important and what pre-existing designs have been successful. The teas that have a fresher flavor are the white teas, yellow teas, and green teas. Since these teas tend to produce tea

soups that are lighter in color, the tea ware is usually a white or light green celadon to highlight the color of the soup. Ideally the tea ware reflects the delicate nature of the tea and is thinner and finer, which also serves to help cool down the tea faster so that the delicate flavors can be perceived and isn't masked by the heat of the soup. Stronger teas are red or black teas, which can often have a more bitter flavor. The tea ware that accompanies these teas are thicker to hold in the heat longer, with darker glaze colors to contrast the tea's reddish soup for red teas.

From there, I looked towards the form to create this sense of lightness and heaviness. This is done by considering the nature of static and dynamic forms. Static forms are often more geometric in nature with a firmly planted base and straight sides. Dynamic forms are rounder with swooping curves and a more delicately balanced foot. From these assumptions I created forms that exist in various states of static and dynamic. By making iterations of different forms and glaze combinations it is possible to find a range from heaviness to lightness in visual weight. Since the tea ceremony is firmly tied to natural world, materials such as wood and stone are used to bring the essence of nature into the setting. Paralleling this tradition, my sets are designed and installed with a goal of bringing a sense of nature into the indoors while maintaining a feeling of overall stillness throughout the collection. Through the use of colors, textures, and materials, an individual environment is established with each set, where viewers are invited to be seated. A sense of grounding is created through the stability and heaviness of form while the glazes are meant to be reminiscent of colors and textures that would be found in nature.

Displayed on unfinished live wood slabs, with a rug and cushion placed in front of each setting, it creates a setting for viewers to sit up close to each tea set. This creates individuality between each set while the close proximity of the sets keeps the sense of it being

part of a group. Each grouping is small in proportion to the human body and designed to create an intimate experience where one must get close to the work in order to perceive the detailing that exists upon each vessel and cup, making it unique within the set. Once the mind's focus rests on the individual rather than the whole, space is created for the consideration of each form's position on a spectrum of contemplative thought and meditative rest, of static versus dynamic.

Through these explorations and iterations, I have discovered that there is a fine balance between ensuring a continuing stillness in the work while creating a sense of dynamic movement. In future experimentations I will further consider dynamic movement in a more abstract and social sense rather than basing it on physical form. I have realized that by creating work that is very grounded through the use of color and material, it would seem off and difficult to create forms that do successfully convey the dynamic energy since the two are conflicting states of being. I would also further consider the design of the tea ware and perfect it. According to Yixing teapot design, some of the signs of a perfectly made pot is that it can be flipped upside down with the rim, handle, and spout rest evenly on the table as well as a perfectly fitting lid that will not leak when flipped upside down while the air hole on the lid is covered. Overall, this process of working through iterations of designs has been successful and jumpstarted further conversations about other aspects of the subject to focus on.

Bibliography

- Lam, Kam Chuen., et al. *The Way of Tea: the Sublime Art of Oriental Tea Drinking*. Barron's Educational Series, 2002.
- Ling, Yun. *Chinese Tea*. Better Link Press, 2010.
- Peltier, Warren V. *The Ancient Art of Tea: Discover the Secret of Happiness in a Perfect Cup of Tea*. Tuttle Pub., 2011.